BEST OF THE WEB

There's no one-stop website giving IFR pilots everything they could want, but here are a few winners for your bookmark list.

IFR Staff

Somewhere between checking your email on Google and praying for a $400 Garmin 396 on eBay, you're probably using the web for your flight planning. There's some great stuff out there. We asked our contributors to chime in with what they liked best.

There was a lot of consensus but no two people had quite the same list. That part of why the web rocks: You can find the right group of tools for you. The problem is where to find the gems amidst the dreck (or the Ads-by-Google).

Just to limit the field a bit, we're only going to look at free websites. So AOPA's flight planner or Weathermeister is off the table for this review. While there is a lot of overlap between the different websites, we can organize them a bit for convenience.

Flight Planning

The go-to site when it comes to flight planning for the IFR pilot is FltPlan.com (www.fltplan.com). Practically the posterchild for function over form, the site isn't pretty or particularly well-designed. It does, however, make a bunch of flight planning tasks easier, especially for recurring trips.

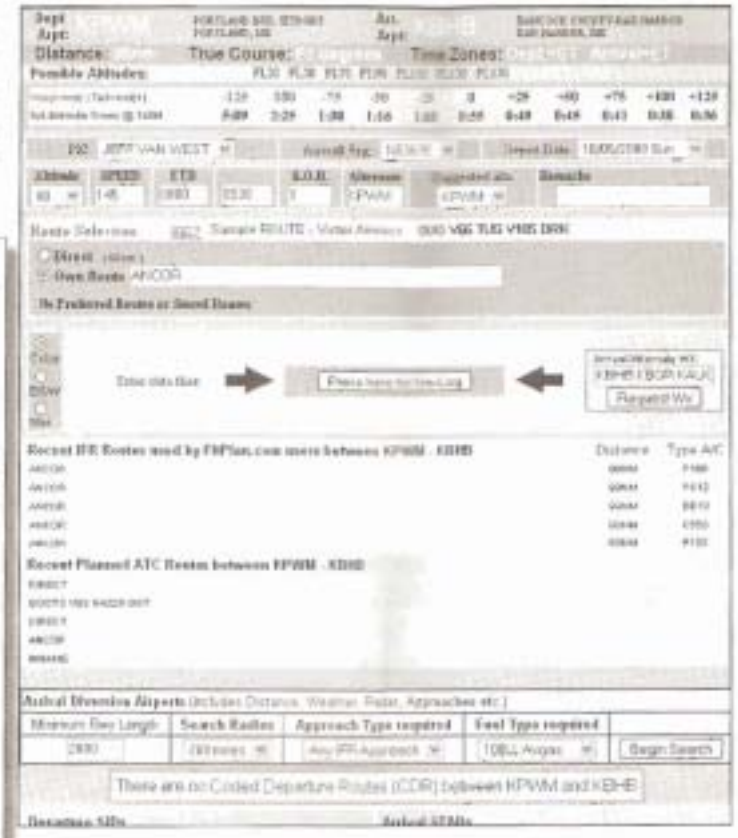
FltPlan.com lets you set up stored aircraft and flight plans. When you select an aircraft and build a flight plan, the data comes out the way a pilot thinks about it: Departure and approach procedures are a click away, a wind matrix lets you look at several altitudes with the probably best altitude shown in green, alternates are suggested by proximity, and the phone numbers for the FBO appear automatically. Weather is available—official, FAA weather—for your route with some nice touches like decoded nearby airports and separation of NOTAM (D) and FDC NOTAMs. You can also get the same info without a flight plan just by entering a departure and destination airport.

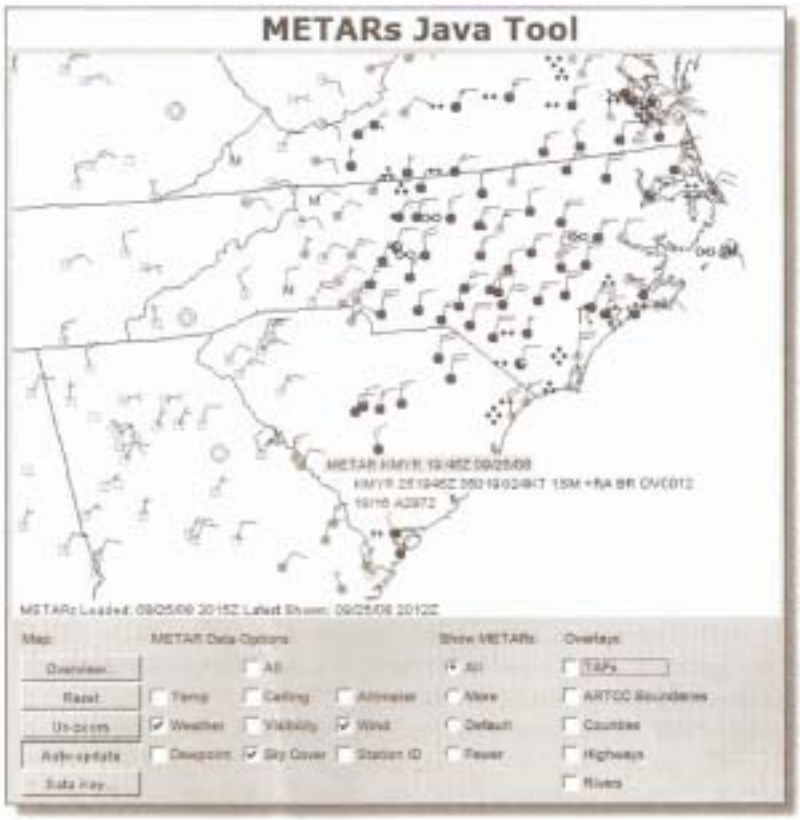
One great feature is putting all this info into a quick nav log with key frequencies and phone numbers as well as a takeoff and landing data card (TOLD) you can fill out for the flight. We'd like to see some way to get fuel burns and such on the TOLD from the flight plan, but it's a good start.

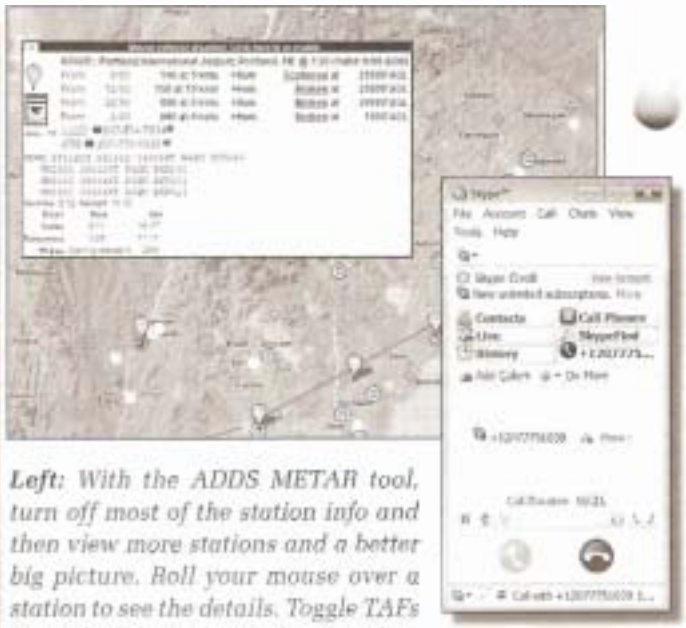
A favorite feature of FltPlan.com is that it can file your flight plans, even scheduling them weeks in advance. There's also a good system for finding fuel stops, but prices are missing for many airports. Better to use AirNav for that.

AirNav (www.airnav.com) has long held the title as the favorite

Right: Fltplan.com has the added bonus of showing commonly-filed routes and ATC-assigned routes between your departure and destination. The navigation log (below) is one of several handy printouts to take with you.







*Left: With the ADDS METAR tool, turn off most of the station info and then view more stations and a better big picture. Roll your mouse over a station to see the details. Toggle TAFs on and off from this tool rather than launching another tool. AvnWx.com (**above**) lets you call ASOS through Skype while you're online as well as layering NEXRAD over a map and airport data.*

place to check fuel prices and get the skinny on different FBOs. You can search for airports by name or identifier and view all the pertinent data, link to sectional charts on SkyVector, see airport diagrams and even photos of the airport. That last one can be invaluable going into some of those stealth fields. But the FBO information and reviews are one of the site's best offerings.

SkyVector (skyvector.com), which is linked off of AirNav, is a repository of scanned sectional, low-altitude, high-altitude, and specialty charts. You can zoom in, zoom out, switch from one type of chart to another and overlay flight plans and current weather. It's great for flight planning. Runway Finder (runwayfinder.com) is similar to SkyVector, except it offers sectional charts, satellite views, topo maps or a Google map. Again, you can get weather and airport information at a click.

Many of these sites show approach plates, but you should know how to view them from the source: NACO's website (naco.faa.gov) has a Free Products link to the lower left of the home page. Digital TPP lets you see high-res PDFs of anything you'd find in a book of NACO approach charts. The Airport Facility Directory (AF/D) entries for individual airports are also available.

Weather on the Web

Sometimes you just want to grab the weather. We have two favorites. One is the ADDS METAR Java tool (adds.aviationweather.noaa.gov/java/), which effectively gives you an interactive weather depiction chart of an entire area. METARs update on this tool sooner than on several other websites. Other great Java tools are the PIREP tool and the Flight Path tool. The latter is actually a standalone program (java-based and free) that lets you layer METARs, winds, icing forecasts and more over a route with both top-down and profile views. The tool is invaluable in icing season. Of course, the whole ADDS site is a top pick for weather.

The other favorite is AvnWx.com (maps.avnwx.com). The base is a Google-generated map, but you can see airports and weather overlaid for a radius around any point as well as NEXRAD, AIRMETs, SIGMETs, and a Surface Analysis chart for the country.

The Weather Underground has both a web interface (www.wunderground.com) and a free mobile-phone weather interface (mobile.wunderground.com). It just looks at one airport (or any location for that matter), but it has NEXRAD with several viewing options and a good forecast. Intellicast Radar (www.intellicast.com/National/Radar/Current.aspx) is also a favorite.

Advanced weather comes in many forms. Two great ones are the Skew-T diagrams and Meteograms. We like NOAA's Java Skew-Ts (ruc.soundings.noaa.gov). As our weather guru Scott Dennstaedt puts it, "They aren't for the faint-hearted. However, you don't have to be a weather weenie to master their mysterious power." Meteograms provide data that's similar to TAFs—but the prediction is for three days out. An IFR subscriber made a free tool that makes the Unisys meteogram easier to read. Download it at www.carleyassociates.com/aviation/.

Flying Resources

There are some sites that don't fit any category exactly, but we find ourselves needing again and again.

The FAA pilot web (pilotweb.nas.faa.gov) has links for current NOTAMs as well as ones in the limbo of the antiquated published NOTAM system. Published NOTAMs might not come up in a briefing, but you can download the lasted PDF of them here and do a quick search.

Other handy government sites are the Aviation Safety Reporting System website (asrs.arc.nasa.gov) and Aviation System Standards (avn.faa.gov/index.asp?xml=index). The latter site lets you see instrument procedures in the making and is the first stop if you want to request a new or changed procedure at your home 'drome.

To track any IFR flight for free, there is always FlightAware (www.flightaware.com). But to hear what's going on with those flights, check out www.liveatc.net. As one of our active controller contacts put it, "The good, the bad and the ugly ... one stop shopping."

Online as well are the FARs (www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/waisidx_08/14cfrv2_08.html), the AIM (www.faa.gov/airports_airtraffic/air_traffic/publications/atpubs/aim/) and the ATC bible 7110.65 (http://www.faa.gov/airports_airtraffic/air_traffic/publications/atpubs/ATC/INDEX.HTM). TERPS and even more technical documents are all over the web too, as well as simulators for many new and old GPS units.

Speaking of simulators: If your VOR navigation skills have gone completely to flab or you know someone trying to understand how anyone can navigate without a GPS, check out Tim's Air Navigation Simulator (www.visi.com/~mim/nav/). For anyone just getting going on this IFR thing, it might be just the place to start using the web to better understand the soup in which we fly.